KEYS TO THE UNIVERSE.

Over one of the outer portals of the Alhambra is engraved, as the traveller will remember, a large, enigmatic key. I had reason to believe, at one time, that it was the key unlocking the Treasure-house of King Yahya and the subterranean palace of his enchanted daughter; and I even communicated this view, at considerable length, to the readers of the Journal des Débats. But I have waxed mystical, like the rest of us, of late, and so I now think that the key on the horse-shoe portal has nothing to do with treasures or infantas, and is simply a symbolic "Key to the Universe."

In our salad days books are very often "Keys to the Universe"; and it is on this pretext that I am allowed to mention the subject of them in these pages. We can all of us remember having thought that the reading of some particular book, or set of books, would act as an Open Sesame admitting us to the terraces and pinnacles of thought whence all things human and divine would be discernible, map-like and clear, at our feet. For some the books have been books on philosophy, for others books on political economy; for Petrarch, as we know, the book was Homer in Greek, which he kept by him and could not read. For the writer of these lines, I am ashamed to say that the key to the universe resided at one time in a treatise on thorough bass, perhaps owing to an insuperable difficulty in grasping whether progression by fourths was extremely desirable or absolutely forbidden. But whatever the books, I think it is certain that no reader of them ever found that they opened any such door as he expected. Indeed, it seems probable that if books ever do act as keys to the universe, or to the smallest pigeon-hole of the universe, it is probably the books which have not been expected to do anything of the kind, and even those of which we have suspected it only long after. For we have a way of looking, so to speak, for the universe on the wrong side, as we look sometimes, in a shuttered room, for a window on the side where there is only dead wall; and we do not always recognize the universe when we get a glimpse of it. And yet that was the universe, perhaps the only universe (all the rest vanity and delusion) we shall ever really enter in the spirit, that land of Cockayne into which we were admitted by some line of poetry, some despised boys' book of adventure.

"From which statement it may be gathered that I tend to believe that the only universe we can ever really know is the universe which we know not through processes of induction or deduction, but through thoroughgoing enjoyment or weary longing or bitter grief. For the universe whose key we each of us seek for is a subjective universe, composed of those elements of our own experience which are nearest akin to ourselves. This is obscure, so I proceed to explain."

It struck me the other day, at the mention of a well-known firm of solicitors, that, in the eyes of a certain friend of mine, these gentlemen undoubtedly hold the key to the universe. Unformulated to himself, my friend feels that what Messrs. Blank and Co. know, explains, or might explain, the problems of life which, to his temper of mind, are the most far-reaching, the secret of the world's how and why. To his temper of mind. But not to the temper of mind of some other person, who may have the same sort of feeling for, say, the nerve-doctor, or the mystic theologian, or the dealer in statistics. Indeed, it is in this exclusively individual quality that lies the interest and utility of these various views; each individual's key to the universe being in fact a key to his personality.

But before developing this theme, allow me to open a